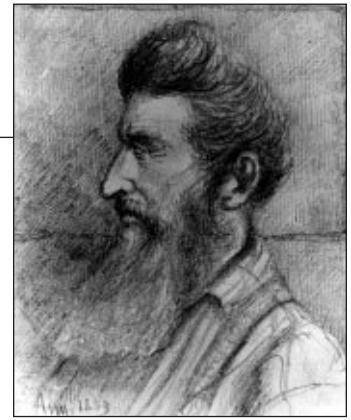


JOHN BROWN'S RAID

Records and Resources at the Library of Virginia



The national debate over the moral and political issues of slavery erupted into bloodshed at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, on 16 October 1859. Historians cite this singular event as a prelude to the Civil War. On that day, abolitionist John Brown led a small group of armed men into the placid river community to seize the federal arsenal and encourage a slave rebellion. The ill-conceived plan soon failed. Brown and most of his men were either killed or captured and the survivors were tried, convicted of treason, and executed. This was not an insignificant local event. Brown's scheme had been financed by wealthy New England abolitionists and focused national attention on an issue which could no longer be placated by compromise. As a result, regional emotions and loyalties quickly became polarized between the Northern free states and the Southern slave states as the nation plunged resistlessly toward armed conflict.

John Brown was born in Torrington, Connecticut, on 9 May 1800. He was the son of Owen Brown and Ruth Mills Brown. His father was a tanner, a farmer, an abolitionist, and an agent for the Underground Railroad. His father's antislavery influence had a lasting effect on young John. John Brown was a poor student and his attempt to study for the ministry ended in failure. He returned home to work in his father's tannery, but experienced a series of business failures throughout his life. His occupations included farmer, surveyor, real estate investor, postmaster, teacher, and wool merchant. His few successes involved abolitionist activities. While living in Richmond, Pennsylvania, his barn served as a station on the Underground Railroad. He also helped to establish two safe havens for free blacks and fugitive slaves in Springfield, Massachusetts, and in North Elba, New York.

At the age of fifty-four, Brown decided to become more actively involved in the abolitionist struggle. In 1855, he moved his family to Osawatimie, Kansas. "Bleeding Kansas" became a battleground between the proslavery and free-state advocates who tried to influence the social and political future of this new territory. Violent incidents occurred regularly for several years. In 1856, John Brown supported the free-state movement by leading a raid on a proslavery settlement at Pottawatomie Creek, leaving five dead. In retaliation, Brown's own home was sacked and burned, forcing him and his family to leave Kansas. But Brown's militant action had attracted the attention of leading Massachusetts abolitionists.

By 1858, Brown had revived an idea to liberate southern slaves, to provide a refuge in the Allegheny Mountains, and to establish a new nation that guaranteed freedom for all. This bold plan required money and preparation. A small group of confidential supporters known as the "Secret Six" helped to provide the financing required for the venture. These six men were later identified as Gerrit Smith, Franklin B. Sanborn, George Luther Stearns, Samuel Gridley Howe, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Theodore Parker. They represented the social and cultural elite of New England and favored militant action against slavery.

During the summer of 1859, Brown initiated his plan by renting the Kennedy farm, just five miles north of Harper's Ferry, in Maryland, as a base of operations. There the abolitionist gathered his followers, arms, and supplies. Soon their target became the U.S. Arsenal and its cache of twenty thousand weapons that were needed to equip Brown's anticipated army of slaves. Late on the night of 16 October, Brown led his small army of twenty-one men, sixteen of whom were white and five black, across the Potomac River and quickly seized the unguarded federal arsenal and armory. The seemingly quiet takeover, however, was marred by the death of Heyward Shepherd, a free black baggage porter for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. Brown's men shot Shepherd when he tried to escape capture. Throughout the night Brown sent raiding parties to gather hostages and slaves from nearby farms. By morning his forces controlled the armory and the bridges leading into town. Astonished by the night's events, angry residents quickly joined local militia to repel this armed invasion of their community. The ever-increasing forces arrayed against them compelled Brown's men to take refuge within the armory's brick fire engine house.

The arrival of Colonel Robert E. Lee from Washington, D. C. with ninety U. S. Marines soon resolved the situation. At dawn on 18 October, Lieutenant J. E. B. Stuart, Lee's aide, approached the besieged abolitionists and offered surrender terms. Upon their refusal, Stuart signaled the Marine assault that battered in the engine house door and quickly subdued the insurgents. The costly adventure ended in failure. Brown and six others were captured; ten, including his sons Watson and Oliver,

were killed. Five managed to escape through the mountains. Brown's men killed five people, including one black man.

Soon after order was restored, Brown and his fellow raiders were transported under guard eight miles to jail in Charlestown, the seat of government for Jefferson County. There he was tried for murder, treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia, and inciting slave insurrection. His jury trial lasted three days and resulted in a guilty verdict on all charges. Judge Richard Parker sentenced Brown to hang on 2 December 1859.

With Brown's fate determined, many citizens in the North viewed his actions as heroic and godlike. Abolitionist rhetoric contributed to this perception and swayed public opinion both for and against Brown. Virginia governor Henry A. Wise received hundreds of letters pleading for clemency for Brown and his followers. The governor was more concerned, however, by the many threatening letters and reports of several armed attempts to rescue Brown from execution. In order to prevent any hostilities, Wise surrounded Charlestown with three thousand state troops reinforced by four Federal companies commanded by Lee. Brown's execution was carried out with high drama, yet without incident. The stoic abolitionist martyr went to his death predicting a national calamity because "the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with Blood." The Civil War began fourteen months later.

This guide provides a listing of archival holdings and a select bibliography of published primary sources relative to John Brown's Raid at the Library of Virginia. The volume of records that the commonwealth created and retained reflects the importance of documenting this extraordinary national event.

STATE RECORDS

RG-3, Governor's Office, Letters Received, Governor Henry A. Wise (1856–1860).

Accession 36710.

Correspondence relating to John Brown's Raid, October 1859 to March 1860. Wise's executive papers are organized into two series: chronological files and subject files. The first series documents the daily work of the governor, consisting primarily of incoming correspondence. The second series contains subject files related to John Brown's Raid, including correspondence asking for the pardon, commutation of punishment, or execution of John Brown. Many of the letters threaten the life of Wise or the invasion of Virginia if Brown is executed. Other subjects found within this series include: intercepted correspondence to Brown; correspondence from detectives pursuing escaped conspirators; correspondence by Charles B. Tidd, a conspirator with Brown; and correspondence of Andrew Hunter, the prosecutor in the case against Brown. In addition, there are receipts and vouchers for various expenses incurred by militia units during their service at Harper's Ferry.

RG-3, Governor's Office, Letter Books, 9 December 1856–29 November 1860.

Accession 35358.

Contains some outgoing correspondence of Governor Wise regarding John Brown's Raid and the arrest of fugitive Albert Hazlett.

RG-3, Governor's Office, Letters Received, Governor John Letcher (1860–1864).

Accession 36787.

Governor Letcher's executive papers are organized into two series: chronological files and subject files. The bulk of the material is contained within the chronological files series, which primarily consists of incoming correspondence between 1860 and 1863. John Brown's Raid documents are found within the subject files series. This includes correspondence related to the request for the pardon of conspirators Aaron D. Stevens and Albert Hazlett, as well as information concerning fugitive conspirators Barclay Coppoc, Owen Brown, and Francis Merriam. Noteworthy items include: a printed protest by the Democratic members of the Iowa General Assembly condemning Governor Kirkwood's refusal to extradite Barclay Coppoc; copies of the indictments for Francis Merriam, Jeremiah Anderson, Owen Brown, and Charles P. Tidd; and documentation of unpaid expenses incurred by militia.

RG-13, Secretary of the Commonwealth, Executive Journals, 1859–1860.

The executive journals are the permanent record of the governor's appointments, executive orders and memoranda, commissions, notaries, pardons, proclamations, writs of election, restoration of rights, renditions, and requisitions as recorded by the Secretary of the Commonwealth. They also serve as a convenient index to the variety of orders and correspondence issued and received by governors Wise and Letcher during the Harper's Ferry crisis.

RG-46, Department of Military Affairs, Office of the Adjutant General, John Brown's Raid Military Order Book, 1859–1860. Accession 36711.

This order book contains general orders issued by Major General William Booth Taliaferro and his subordinates following John Brown's Raid between 23 November 1859 and 19 January 1860. The orders primarily consist of officer's assignments, troop movements, and discharges. Of particular note is General Order No. 25, which details the orders for the day of Brown's execution.

RG-46, Department of Military Affairs, Office of the Adjutant General, John Brown's Raid Special Orders, 1859. Accession 36712.

The Special Orders were issued by Major General William Booth Taliaferro and his subordinates following John Brown's Raid between 24 November and 21 December 1859. The orders primarily concern supplies and leaves of absence.

RG-46, Department of Military Affairs, Office of the Adjutant General, John Brown's Raid Military Expenses, 1859. Accession 36744.

The military expenses ledger contains financial accounts of expenditures accrued by Virginia militia during John Brown's Raid in 1859. The ledger itemizes expenses chronologically between October and December 1859. It also provides the itemized cost and total amount expended by the individual or regiment. The second half of the ledger includes additional expenses accumulated by regiment.

RG-46, Department of Military Affairs, Board of Commissioners, John Brown's Raid Military Expenses, 1860. Accession 36955.

On 2 January 1860, the General Assembly passed an act appointing commissioners to audit and pay the expenses incurred by the Executive for the purchase of arms and munitions, and for the defense of the commonwealth. The board's function was to settle all accounts incurred in assembling, arming, equipping, transporting, and maintaining troops during John Brown's Raid. This volume contains the names of those individuals and businesses that were owed money for their contribution in the defense of Virginia. A typical entry provides a brief description of the item or service, the date, and a dollar value. Some of the expenses include forage, lodging, meals, damages, mules, transportation of troops, and payment for military service.

RG-46, Department of Military Affairs, Board of Commissioners, John Brown's Raid Claims, 1860–1861. Accession 36956.

This volume contains a chronological list of claims by those individuals and businesses that were owed money for their contribution in the defense of Virginia during John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry between 25 January 1860 and 11 January 1861. This ledger seems to be a companion to the John Brown's Raid military expenses volume (Accession 36955).

RG-46, Department of Military Affairs, Department of Confederate Military Records, John Brown's Raid Muster Rolls, 1859–1860. Accession 27684.

The payrolls and rosters of those militia companies that were ordered to defend Harper's Ferry and Charlestown against additional rumored attacks. They served until Brown's execution.

RG-48, Auditor of Public Accounts, Harper's Ferry Fund, Accounts and Receipts, 1860–1861. APA entry 145.

In 1860, the General Assembly passed several acts authorizing the payment of expenses incurred by the Virginia militia during John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry. The secretary of the commonwealth, auditor of public accounts, and adjutant general were appointed commissioners to settle accounts. Perhaps the most intriguing is the payroll voucher submitted by John Wilkes Booth. As a member of the 1st Virginia Volunteers, Booth received \$64.58 for nineteen days military service. The warrant approving payment is dated 14 April 1860.

RG-48, Auditor of Public Accounts, Military Contingent Fund, Vouchers, 1796–1807, 1811–1843, 1850–1865. APA entry 142.

The term contingent fund encompasses a wide variety of funds set aside for special purposes by the General Assembly. The military contingent fund paid for a variety of militia expenses. Most of these records concern the War of 1812, Nat Turner's Rebellion, and the Civil War. A few militia expense claims relative to Harper's Ferry activities are found in these records.

RG-48, Auditor of Public Accounts, Rewards for the Arrest of Criminals. Certificates, 1859–1860. APA entry 690.

The 1849 Code of Virginia (section 13, chapter 45) allowed the payment of rewards for services rendered or expenses incurred in the arrest of criminals. The series consists of certificates authenticating the informer's right to a reward.

Albert Hazlett, alias William Harrison, a fugitive from the Harper's Ferry Raid, was captured by Michael W. Houser in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, five days after the event on 22 October 1859. Houser submitted an expense claim on 25 November.

RG-100, Supreme Court of Appeals, Richmond Session, Order Book No. 20, January 9, 1856–November 23, 1860. [microfilm]

The Supreme Court of Appeals rendered its opinion on 19 November 1859, to deny the petition of John Brown for a writ of error in his conviction by the circuit court of Jefferson County.

STATE DOCUMENTS

Acts of the General Assembly of Virginia, Session Laws, 1859–1861. Richmond, 1861.

Details various acts and resolutions passed by the General Assembly regarding the expenses and executions resulting from John Brown's Raid.

Brown, John. Court of Appeals of Virginia. Richmond. *Commonwealth v. Brown*. [n.p., 1859]. 16 pp.

Petition from John Brown to the Supreme Court of Appeals of Virginia for a writ of error regarding his conviction by the circuit court of Jefferson County.

Calendar of Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts from January 1, 1836 to April 15, 1869; Preserved in the Capitol at Richmond, 11 volumes. Richmond, 1893. Vol. 11, pp. 73–101, 269–349.

Reprints substantial records and executive correspondence about John Brown's Raid. These records also include captured correspondence written by Brown and his associates, Brown's Declaration of Independence and provisional Constitution, a draft for a Provisional Army, and members of his provisional government.

Virginia. Governor (1856–1860: Wise). *Governor's Biennial Messages to the General Assembly of the State of Virginia, December 5, 1859*. Richmond, 1859. 48 pp. House Document 1.

Message I relates principally to the John Brown Raid. Message II relates to miscellaneous subjects.

Virginia. Governor (1856–1860: Wise). *Governor's Message and Reports of the Public Officers of the State, of the Boards of Directors, and of the Visitors, Superintendents, and Other Agents of Public Institutions or Interests of Virginia*. Richmond, 1859. 155 pp. House Document 1.

Message I relates principally to the John Brown Raid. Message II is an appendix to Message I containing documents relative to the Harper's Ferry invasion.

Virginia. Governor (1860–1864: Letcher). *Communication from the Governor of Virginia Enclosing Letters from the Governor of Iowa, Responsive to a Requisition from This State Relative to Barclay Coppoc, February 13, 1860*. Richmond, 1860. 8 pp. Senate Document 39.

Requisition relative to Barclay Coppoc, who participated in the Harper's Ferry Raid and escaped capture.

Virginia. Governor (1860–1864: Letcher). *Governor's Message Relative to the Refusal of the Governor of Ohio to Surrender Fugitives from Justice [Francis Merriam and Owen Brown], March 14, 1860*. Richmond, 1860. 23 pp. House Document 89.

Virginia. Governor (1860–1864: Letcher). *Governor's Communication Relative to the Expense of Guarding Stevens and Hazlett, March 27, 1860*. Richmond, 1860. 8 pp. House Document 94.

Virginia. General Assembly. Joint Committee on Harper's Ferry Outrages. *Report of the Joint Committee of the General Assembly of Virginia on the Harper's Ferry Outrages, January 26, 1860*. Richmond, 1860. 64 pp. Senate Document 31.

Virginia. General Assembly. Joint Committee on Harper's Ferry Outrages. *Report of the Joint Committee on the Harper's Ferry Outrages, January 26, 1860*. Richmond, 1860. 102 pp. House Document 57.

The preceding two reports of the Joint Committee on Harper's Ferry Outrages contain an overview of specific northern state laws that the committee considered hostile to the rights of slave owners, the slaveholding states, and contrary to the recovery of fugitive slaves.

Virginia. General Assembly. *Report of the Joint Committee on the Subject of the Refusal of the Governors of Iowa and Ohio to Surrender Fugitives from Justice, March 1860*. Richmond, 1860. 6 pp. House Document 95.

Virginia. Commissioners Appointed to Audit and Pay the Expenses Incurred in Defense of Virginia. *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Audit and Pay the Expenses Incurred at Harper's Ferry*. Richmond, 1860. 20 pp. House Document 80.

FEDERAL DOCUMENTS

United States. Congress. Senate. *Report of the Select Committee of the Senate Appointed to Inquire into the Late Invasion and Seizure of the Public Property at Harper's Ferry*. Washington, D.C., 1860. 255 pp., 36th Congress, 1st session, Senate, Report, Committee No. 278.

This congressional report includes "views of the minority," prepared by Jacob Collamer, a journal of the committee, an appendix of relevant documents, and the testimony of witnesses taken before the committee.

United States. Congress. Senate. *Select Committee to Investigate John Brown's 1859 Raid on the U.S. Arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia*. Records, 1859–1860 [microfilm]. Miscellaneous microfilm reels 954–956. Accession 32007.

This select committee was established by the U.S. Senate on 14 December 1859 to secure the facts concerning the seizure of the arsenal by Brown, especially the nature of his organization, the sources of his military equipment and of his financial support. It was also to suggest legislation that would help preserve the peace in the future. The committee was disbanded on 15 June 1860. Although the content of reels 1 and 2 are published in Senate Report 278, 36th Congress, 1st Session, most records found on reel 3 have not been previously published. A detailed list of the contents of these reels appears on the microfilm preceding the records.

MAP COLLECTION

Plan of Charlestown, Jefferson County, West Virginia. Publisher O. W. Gray and Son, Philadelphia, 1879.

This detailed map identifies many homes and public buildings including the site of John Brown's execution.

NEWSPAPERS

Baltimore *American and Commercial Advertiser*. Film 1283.

New York *Herald*. Film 1460.

Although many national newspapers provided extensive coverage of the events following John Brown's Raid, on 21 October 1859 these two published Brown's first interview after his capture.

PERSONAL PAPERS COLLECTION

Brown, John, (1800–1859). Transcripts of Letters, 1830–1859 [microfilm]. Miscellaneous microfilm reels 875, 999. Accessions 31218 and 32561 are identical copies.

Letters, 1830–1859, tracing a variety of events in John Brown's life, from the death of his first wife to his hanging in 1859. This is a collection of over two hundred letters to family members, political leaders, and abolitionists. It documents his mental state during his various wanderings, his financial failures, his central role in violent attacks in Kansas,

his capture of the armory at Harper's Ferry, and the subsequent trial and his execution in December 1859. The letters also include information on place, date, and recipient, as well as on their location and ownership at the time of their transcription.

Logan, John B. I., (1811–1877). Papers, 1816–1886. Accession 35830.

Lawyer and resident of Salem, Roanoke County, Virginia. This collection includes letters, accounts and receipts, memorandum books, and estate papers. Topics covered in the letters include family news, weather, travel, health, invitations, legal and financial matters. The letters also touch on issues relating to the Civil War, including secession, fatalities, and national politics. Of particular note is a letter, dated 30 November 1859, written by Logan describing his personal and political views about the Harper's Ferry Raid.

PUBLISHED PRIMARY SOURCES

Anderson, Osborne P. *A Voice from Harper's Ferry; a Narrative of Events at Harper's Ferry [with Incidents Prior and Subsequent to Its Capture By Captain Brown and His Men]*. Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1972. Reprint of 1861 edition.

Anderson was a free black member of Brown's army who escaped capture.

Cooke, John E. *Confession of John E. Cooke, Brother-in-law of Governor A. P. Willard, of Indiana, and One of the Participants in the Harper's Ferry Invasion*. Charlestown, Va.: D. S. Eichelberger, 1859.

Cook was a primary participant in Brown's new society. He escaped capture at Harper's Ferry, but was arrested in Pennsylvania and returned to Charlestown for trial and execution.

De Witt, Robert M. *The Life, Trial and Execution of Captain John Brown: Known As "Old Brown of Ossawatimie," with a Full Account of the Attempted Insurrection at Harper's Ferry*. New York: Robert M. De Witt, 1859.

Compiled from official and authentic sources, includes John E. Cooke's confession and all the incidents of the execution. Also includes a report of Brown's trial before the Circuit Court of Jefferson County, 25 October–2 November 1859.

Drew, Thomas. *The John Brown Invasion; an Authentic History of the Harper's Ferry Tragedy, with Full Details of the Capture, Trial, and Execution of the Invaders, and of All the Incidents Connected Therewith*. Boston: J. Campbell, 1860.

The author attempted to publish an accurate narrative of events using a variety of contemporary sources; it contains a strong New England bias in its portrayal of "the hero of Harper's Ferry."

Glasgow, J. Ewing. *The Harper's Ferry Insurrection: Being an Account of the Late Outbreak in Virginia, and of the Trial and Execution of Captain John Brown, its Hero*. Edinburgh: M. McPhail, 1860.

Iowa. Governor (1860–1864: Kirkwood). *Special Message of Governor Samuel J. Kirkwood in Reply to a Resolution of Inquiry Passed by the House of Representatives, March 2, 1860, in Relation to the Requisition of the Governor of Virginia for One Barclay Coppoc*. Des Moines, Iowa: John Teesdale, 1860.

Barclay Coppoc escaped capture at Harper's Ferry and returned home to Iowa. All requests for his extradition to Virginia for trial were denied.

Lawson, John D., ed. *American State Trials; a Collection of the Important and Interesting Criminal Trials Which Have Taken Place in the United States, from the Beginning of Our Government to 1920*, 17 volumes. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1972.

This resource contains 164 pages of Jefferson County circuit court trial transcripts for John Brown and his associates.

Leech, Samuel V. *The Raid of John Brown at Harper's Ferry As I Saw It*. Washington, D.C., published by the author, 1909.

Redpath, James. *Echoes of Harper's Ferry*. Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860.

A collection of antislavery papers, poems, etc., commemorative of John Brown. Also contains reprints of letters addressed to John Brown while in prison at Charlestown.

_____. *The Public Life of Captain John Brown: with an Autobiography of His Childhood and Youth*. Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860.

Also published in 1859 by W. Tweedie in London under the title, *The Hero of Harper's Ferry: Being the Public Life of Captain John Brown*.

Sanborn, Franklin B. *The Life and Letters of John Brown, Liberator of Kansas, and Martyr of Virginia*. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891.

Sanborn was one of Brown's financial supporters known as the "Secret Six."

Trumbull, Lyman. *Remarks of Hon. Lyman Trumbull, of Illinois, on Seizure of Arsenal of Harper's Ferry, Va., and Liberty, Mo., and in Vindication of the Republican Party and its Creed, in Response to Senators Chesnut, Yulee, Saulsbury, Clay and Pugh. Delivered in the United States Senate, December 6, 7, and 8, 1859*. Washington, D.C.: Buell and Blanchard, 1859.

Wayland, John W. "One of John Brown's Men." *Pennsylvania-German* 10 (1909): 1–11.

A biographical sketch of John Henry Kagi, one of John Brown's highest ranking associates. He held the title of Secretary of War in Brown's provisional government.

Zittle, John H. *A Correct History of the John Brown Invasion at Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, October 17, 1859*. Hagerstown, Md.: Mail Publishing Company, 1905.

John H. Zittle who was an eyewitness to John Brown's Raid compiled the historical information. This information was later edited and published by his widow.

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

The Pierre Morand Memorial Album of Original Drawings. Rare Book Collection.

A collection of drawings by Virginia-born artist David Hunter Strother (1816–1888). This collection includes a sketch of John Brown dated 25 August 1859 (cover image).

Compiled by R. Thomas Crew Jr.,
with assistance from Craig S. Moore
Archives Research Services
December 1999